

Walking the walk; Self-styled 'eco-man' lives what he preaches

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Body

BLOOMINGTON - Gregg Brown thinks of himself as a modern-day Paul Revere of sorts.

But his message is "The heat is coming" instead of "The British are coming."

And he doesn't have a horse. He walks.

His passion is warning people about global warming and what can be done to lessen dependence on fossil fuels. He volunteers dozens of hours a month educating people about those issues and other environmental dangers.

"One person can deliver the warning - it's up to the community to respond," Brown said. "I've read enough books, listened to enough real scientists."

His lifestyle is monklike by American standards - he doesn't own a television, microwave, computer or car. He has lived in a small two-room Bloomington apartment for nine years. The nearest grocery store is a mile away, so he buys what he can carry.

Environmental papers, newspaper clippings and books consume much of the floor space in the room off the kitchen. There's one upholstered chair, a lamp, a coffee table, a two-drawer chest and a bookshelf. A pillow and blankets on the floor are his bed - an actual bed, he explained, would take up too much space.

"Organization isn't my forte," he said of his apartment.

But maybe it is.

For the last couple of years, he has systematically hand-delivered copies of his handwritten environmental messages from his apartment in the 300 block of East Locust Street to Bloomington and Normal city halls, Illinois State and Illinois Wesleyan universities, school district offices, hospitals, various media, and offices of state and national political officeholders.

The farthest he has walked is locations on or near Veterans Parkway. He recalls one summer day going at noon and not getting back until suppertime. A walk to ISU takes 45 minutes each way.

Brown, who is in his 50s, walks somewhere every day, but he has never kept track of the miles. He spent an average of 40 hours a week in the last year trying to educate the public.

His current focus is the World Scientists' Warning to Humanity, and he has hand-delivered hundreds of copies. "My work is to deliver this warning and the solutions that are offered."

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That warning from the Union of Concerned Scientists, signed by more than 1,700 scientists worldwide, begins with "Human beings and natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know."

Though first issued in 1992, a lot of people still don't know about it, he said.

Brown wants to change that one person at a time.

"I'm hoping it reduces them to quivering puppy flesh," he said.

Cold weather does not deter him on his eco-man rounds - "as long as I bundle up. It is a pain sometimes." His feet and hands get really cold.

He does not put a 37-cent stamp on an envelope and mail it because "I get to talk to somebody - talk to the secretaries and look into their eyes - human interaction."

"It just kinda happened. There wasn't any plan," he said of his one-man crusade.

He is education coordinator for the Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC) at Illinois State University and is a steadfast presence at rallies and other events at ISU.

"He's lived his life dedicated, not sidetracked by material desires," said Angelo Capparella, an ISU professor of biology and faculty adviser for SEAC.

"He provides a very important role. He's trying to help awareness. He definitely lives on the (economic) edge, which makes it all the more impressive in terms of how he can leave the world a better place," the professor said. He said Brown has an excellent grasp of what scientists are saying, though he was not trained as a scientist.

Brown has two major environmental worries right now. He is fearful of great damage to the earth from a war with Iraq. And he worries very much about global warming, so he is a staunch advocate of alternative energy sources.

"Dr. Capparella told me that in his opinion, the best solution for the creation of energy is a mix of approaches - wind power, solar power, hydrogen energy, geothermal, hydropower and plant energy (such as from industrial hemp)." Brown dreams of total independence from foreign oil.

The United States, which has about 2 percent of the world's global oil reserves, eventually may not have much choice. The world produces one barrel of oil for each four barrels it is consuming, according to "The Phoenix Project," a book by Harry Braun.

"We can have an economy and have our future. We just can't have this economy and have our future," Brown said. "You look into the eyes of the beautiful young people. I see hurt and anger and confusion in their eyes."

He's regularly at ISU events with displays of save-the-earth books, many of which are checked out again and again from the Bloomington Public Library and lugged around in a much-used cardboard box. Lack of money prevents him from buying many books. He owns about a dozen.

Brown was offered a free microwave oven and television, but declined. He doesn't care for computers, citing the Internet's "dark side" of misinformation. He prefers books to learn what scientists have to say.

"I like to turn the pages," he said. "I devour books. Stacks of books. I'm not a speed reader."

Brown's first jolt came in sixth or seventh grade. He was raised on a farm in Walnut, about 100 miles northwest of the Twin Cities. "It wasn't media-saturated," he said, recalling the only publication his family got was the local newspaper, The Walnut Leader.

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But a current events newsletter at school told about Strontium 90, a radioactive substance, being found in babies' teeth. He remembers thinking "that's crazy."

Saving the earth was not his focus in college - he participated in protests against the Vietnam War. After graduating from ISU with a degree in sociology, he had a number of jobs, including temporary work, factory work and a doughnut shop. "I've worked all my life. I've never climbed any ladder" said Brown, who is divorced with no children.

His interest in New Age prepared him for what he is doing. "The literature is saturated with messages about taking care of the natural world."

Brown worked part of last year, but despite that money running low, he continues his one-man crusade.

"Balance is something I've never been very good at," he explained.

"I've always considered myself part of the counterculture. I've always had this sense something is very wrong."

"We may still have the same bad thinking as several hundred years ago, but technology has given us the power to make decisions millions of times more damaging."

"It's like the Titanic and the iceberg - we need to turn the ship."

Helping out

To live a more ecologically balanced life, Gregg Brown suggests you:

- * Live close to where you work and shop.
- * Walk or bicycle or take the bus.
- * Buy the smallest vehicle practical for your needs, and one rated highly for fuel efficiency.
- * Plan errands so you get the most done with the least amount of gas.
- * Simplify your life. Give away things you aren't using. Reduce consumption. Reuse and recycle whatever you can.
- * Remember that water is a precious resource, and don't waste it.

Top 10 books to live by

Gregg Brown recommends 10 books to understand the problems our nation faces:

1. "The Heat Is On: The Climate Crisis, The Cover-Up, The Prescription" by Ross Gelbspan
2. "Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks At Cancer And The Environment" by Sandra Steingraber
3. "Blue Gold: The Fight To Stop The Corporate Theft Of The World's Water" by Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke
4. "Fateful Harvest: The True Story of a Small Town, a Global Industry and a Toxic Secret" by Duff Wilson
5. "Earth in the Balance: Ecology And The Human Spirit" by Al Gore
6. "Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic" by John DeGraaf, David Wann and Thomas Naylor
7. "Hemp; Lifeline To The Future: The Unexpected Answer For Our Environment And Economic Recovery" by Chris Conrad
8. "Betrayal of Science And Reason: How Anti-Environmental Rhetoric Threatens Our Future" by Paul and Ann Ehrlich

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9. "The Threat At Home: Confronting The Toxic Legacy of the U.S. Military" by Seth Shulman

10. "In The Absence Of The Sacred: The Failure Of Technology And The Survival Of The Indian Nations" by Jerry Mander

Graphic

Environmental activist Gregg Brown uses foot power to deliver his educational booklets. Brown doesn't have a car, so he logs many miles each week on foot. (Ritchie)

Brown talked passionately about the Centers for Disease Control's warning on the environment during a recent meeting of the Student Environmental Action Coalition at Illinois State University. (Cook)

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